

## **New Hiking and Caving Opportunities at Cordell Hull Birthplace**

*By Robin Peeler*



Hikers gather at the entrance to Bunkum Cave at Cordell Hull Birthplace State Park in Byrdstown.

*Photo by Pat Horn.*

These days there is more to do when you visit Cordell Hull Birthplace State Park in Byrdstown.

Since its inception as a state park in 1997, the birthplace has seen many improvements and changes such as the addition of a paved parking lot, native landscaping, and a picnic area. In 2002, the state acquired an additional 29 acres that includes access to the historic and beautiful Bunkum Cave. Most recently, the state park is working on and has partially completed a trail system to encompass this new land and provide a safe and scenic route to get to the cave.

As a quick history refresher, Cordell Hull (1871-1955) was Secretary of State under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt from 1933-1944, a period including World War II. During this time, his most well known achievements were fostering free trade, promoting the Good Neighbor Policy with Latin America, and establishing the groundwork for the United Nations that was officially created in 1945 after his retirement. In fact, Cordell Hull received the Nobel Prize for Peace that year for his role in this historically significant event. While the original prize is now stored outside of the park, a replica of the prize is housed at the park's museum along with many other personal effects including documents, awards, furniture and artwork. The Cordell Hull Collection is owned by the Friends of Cordell Hull and housed and cared for by Tennessee State Parks.

Also located on the property is Cordell Hull's restored birth cabin. This two-room cabin contains many late 19th century artifacts that depict life on the plateau during the time period when Hull was born. Cordell Hull lived here from birth until age four. His father, known as "Uncle Billy" Hull, was a farmer at the time and also did his share of moonshining. In fact, his moonshine still was set up at the entrance of Bunkum Cave. By the time he was caught and fined \$25, he had saved up \$1,000 from his side business and moved the family down to near the Obey River (now Dale Hollow Reservoir). Here they had rights to outstanding timber land and began rafting logs down to the Cumberland River and on to Nashville. Cordell and his brothers helped with this endeavor as river hands on occasion.

In order to reach Bunkum Cave you must cross through a section of Upper Cumberland mixed hardwood forest. During the fall of 2004 and the winter and spring of 2005, AmeriCorps\*NCCC

members, local volunteers, and state park staff built a mile long section of trail which leads to an overlook of the cave. An observation deck at this location lends to a startling view of the cave entrance that rests at the base of a steep ravine.

The trailhead is located across the road from the park office and is well marked. Plans are underway to build a parking lot in the coming year but currently parking is comprised of a small gravel area near the park maintenance area. The new trail meanders through the woods and allows the visitor to view many of nature's beauties. Spring affords a brilliant display of wildflowers including Fire Pink, Mayapple, Cut-Leaf Toothwort, Golden Ragwort, pachysandra, spring beauty, hepatica, Wild Ginger, a variety of trilliums, trout lily, and much more.

A few small bridges cross ephemeral creeks that provide varied habitats and increase the possibility of seeing critters. Signs of wildlife may be found all along the way and sightings include White-tailed Deer, Wild Turkey, various hawks and owls, snakes, frogs and toads, and a variety of insects. More than 40 bird species have been recorded including Red-bellied Woodpeckers, several types of flycatchers, Red-eyed Vireos, Yellow-breasted Chats, Blue Grosbeaks, and Kentucky Warblers. A particularly peaceful section of the trail borders a wet weather creek and is lined with numerous Christmas Ferns. Other ferns on the property are Ebony Spleenwort and Rattlesnake Fern.

Although the first phase of the trail project is completed, much hard work is left to finish the entire trail. The second phase is currently underway and includes the section of trail that takes you down the bluff to the cave entrance. This half-mile portion of the trail goes over the top of the ridge and then drops steeply down the bluff at which point a set of stairs is being built. Park goals are to have this portion of the trail completed this winter. The third phase of the trail project will add an additional mile through the forest to provide a total loop trail of approximately 2.5 miles. This final phase should complete by the winter of 2007. The overall rating of the trail is moderate due to some gentle hills.

Bunkum Cave is listed in Thomas C. Barr's Caves of Tennessee as "one of the most impressive cave mouths in Tennessee." At 100 feet wide and 50 feet tall, the entrance is no less than awe-inspiring. A cave stream runs out of it and enters a surface stream. That makes entrance into the cave during or following heavy rains inadvisable. The main passage is 750 feet long and averages 15 feet wide. Three passages develop and each narrows and eventually becomes strictly a crawl space. The first part of the cave you can enjoy from an easy, upright position and most definitely merits the hike down.

Like most of the caves in the Tennessee and the Upper Cumberland, Bunkum Cave was created probably thousands or even millions of years ago due to the karst topography of the region. More soluble limestone was eroded by water and left the resistant rock that comprises the tunnel today. Research shows that Bunkum Cave was heavily used in both prehistoric and historic times. Surveys over the years have shown evidence of use by prehistoric Native Americans as a burial cave. In the 1920s the Smithsonian Institute conducted archaeological explorations of the cave and took significant artifacts to Washington, D.C. Over time, the cave was used for shelter by Native Americans and settlers as they passed through the area. As mentioned, Cordell Hull's own father used the cave as a hideout for his corn whiskey production. In the last 200 years, the cave has been a popular hangout for local citizens and has likely been the location for preaching, weddings, parties, and general "cooling off" in the summer months.

Once you enter the deep, dark, and cool world of the cave you can see many different fascinating cave features. Some formations that you may view are flowstone, stalactites (hanging down), stalagmites (pointing up), columns, cave pearls, cave popcorn, and soda straws. All of these take years and years to form and should only be observed and not touched. Other possible sightings include cave salamanders, little brown and pipistrelle bats, camel and cave crickets, numerous orb weaver spiders, and crayfish. If you take your time and use your senses, you will find that the subterranean world is quite beautiful and unusual. If you also give your attention to the floor of the cave as you walk along, you may see old pieces of deer bones that have washed in with the creek or through a nearby sinkhole or even clusters of lithostrotion coral, a marine fossil from millions of years ago.

Caves are a fragile, precious, and living resource. Please enter them with respect and remember you are a visitor. To better protect Bunkum Cave and enhance visitor safety, it is requested that folks

interested in going past the cave entrance please check in with the park office. Here are some ideas of what to bring when you are going in a cave: warm clothes as the temperature averages 55 degrees year round; at least three sources of light plus spare batteries and bulbs; a first aid kit; a friend; water to drink, and of course, food! Do not drink the creek water in a cave because it may be contaminated. The more adventurous cavers will want to bring a helmet, kneepads, and a pair of gloves. Also, be sure to tell someone where you are going and when you plan to return.

Some rules to remember while you are caving:

1. Please do not touch the walls, there may be formations in the making!
2. When you are caving you should never write or mark on the walls in any way.
3. Never take anything out of the cave except for photographs and trash.
4. Never leave anything in the cave.
5. Be sure to take a keen sense of observation as there will be lots of interesting things to look at, both living and nonliving.
6. Digging for artifacts is illegal and harmful to the area so avoid that too.
7. Let the critters be. If you see an animal, check it out and then be on your way so it won't be stressed.

While hiking and caving are an exciting addition to the scope of Cordell Hull Birthplace State Park, visitors are encouraged to stop in and visit the museum and birthplace. There is much to be learned about the life Cordell Hull. It is an inspiration to all Tennesseans to see that a humble backwoods beginning such as his can lead to a career as an international leader with lasting impact. As you walk from his cabin through the forest to Bunkum Cave, you can almost hear the lively laughter of young Cordell and his brothers as they followed their father through the woods on another adventure. Some things have not changed much at all in the 134 years since Cordell Hull played in this forest.

Cordell Hull Birthplace is located at 1300 Cordell Hull Memorial Drive in Byrdstown, approximately 1.5 miles off Highway 111. The park is open daily from 9 a.m.-5p.m. From November to March, hours are 9 a.m.-4 p.m. For more information on special events, volunteer days, park activities, and trail updates please contact the park at 931-864-3247 or check out the following Web sites:  
<http://www.tnstateparks.com/cordellhull/> or [www.cordellhullmuseum.com](http://www.cordellhullmuseum.com).

(Robin Peeler is the park manager at Cordell Hull Birthplace State Park. She has worked as a park ranger at Radnor Lake State Natural Area and at Pickett State Park.)